

The Cafés Literature Made, the Literature Cafés Made: Literature, Authorship, Sociability and Commerce in the French Coffeehouse, 1650-1800

Thierry Rigogne

**Associate Professor of History
Fordham University**

My starting point is the striking affinity between cafés and literature. But affinity is not much of a historical concept. So what is the nature of the connections that have formed between writers and cafés, literature and coffeehouses? In particular, what role did literature play in the creation and in the development of French cafés? What kind of literature could be found, exchanged or purchased in early modern cafés? What writers went to cafés and to do what? How did cafés affect the development of literature as a cultural field and how did they contribute to the rise of the figure of the author?

Coffeehouse literature began well before cafés even existed. Starting in the late sixteenth century and exploding in the seventeenth, all sorts of texts and images belonging to the vast production about the Orient described in great detail Ottoman and Persian coffeehouses. These widely-read representations powerfully shaped expectations and formed a matrix from which all European coffeehouses were issued. As soon as the first French establishments opened in the 1660s, they figured prominently in a wide range of literature, from plays to guidebooks, from novels to travel accounts, from pamphlets to moralistic tracts.

Texts and images representing cafés have always been studied as descriptive of actual social practices in specific establishments. This reductive approach misses two key dimensions, however. First, most texts used cafés, real or imagined, in a prescriptive way, as rhetorical moves in debates over a nascent institution of the public sphere and, beyond it, in arguments over norms of sociability in the public realm and over the contours and tenor of public discourse. Secondly, literature and café culture developed concurrently, in productive tension with each other, each shaping the other while being shaped in return. Early on, writers invested cafés physically as places where they could fashion a new type of sociability and engage in activities such as criticism, but also symbolically as a space in which they could play out their aspirations as “authors” (or against it) and argue over the shape of the cultural field they were creating, “literature.” Therefore, we can profitably revisit texts about cafés as interventions in a larger process: the parallel creation of the café through literature and that of literature and authorship in and through cafés.

By focusing on representations as well as on practices and by studying texts and images as not only descriptions but as prescriptions, as metaphorical constructs and as rhetorical moves, this communication applies new tools on a completely renewed corpus of images, texts and archival documents to shed light on the interactions between cafés and literature, and the various types of commerce (of ideas, of books, interpersonal) they generated in what was a profoundly formative period for both.